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ALBANIA: THE LAND OF THE EAGLE-PEOPLE

By Morris H. Turk, Ph.D.

Just one hundred years ago Lord Byron, in company with his friend, Mr. Hobhouse, was engaged in a tour of Albania, writing as he journeyed, the first and second Cantos of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage." Upon its publication two years later the poet "awakened one morning and found himself famous." Much of the second Canto is given to a description of the wild and rugged land of Albania with its equally wild and rugged people. It is an interesting fact that the poem which first gave Byron his fame was thus produced in Albania and had for its subject matter that picturesque land and people.

Contemporary with Lord Byron the historian Gibbon declared that Albania although "within sight of Italy was less known than the interior of America." And it still holds true that Albania is comparatively an unknown land. Every week great steamships from New York and other world-ports pass almost within sight of the wild Albanian coast. It is only six hours across the blue Adriatic to Italy. A two days' journey, even by the leisurely good-natured continental trains will take a Parisian or a Berliner to this belated land of the Eagle-People. In the very heart of European civilization, yet untouched by it, Albania lags five centuries behind the times.

The cause is not difficult to find; Albania is a part of the Turkish Empire, and for centuries her people have lived under Turkish oppression. Geographically Albania is simply a general term for the western part of European Turkey; the definite boundaries being the Adriatic Sea on the west, Montenegro, Bosnia and Servia on the north and Greece on the south. There is no definite eastern boundary but Monastir is commonly regarded as the gateway from

the East. With Austria to the northward, Italy just across the Adriatic and Greece adjoining on the south, all anxious to extend their spheres of influence in this unconquered country, the Turkish government, with territory repeatedly diminished elsewhere, has considered it wise to keep Albania as much as possible in the background of European politics. Accordingly a continual and composite program of armed invasion, official flattery, oppressive taxation and bribery has served to keep the Eagle-People in subjection. But the Albanians, while a subject race, have never been wholly conquered; and the greatest political problem of the Turkish Empire today is to hold the Albanians in hand.

Another factor which conspires to make Albania suffer from arrested development is found in the character of the country, a fair combination of rugged mountains and fertile valleys. Entrenched in their mountain strongholds the Albanians have administered endless defeat to successive Turkish armies, even those led by the sultan in person. On the other hand the fertile valleys have made the Albanians self-sufficient and generally independent of commerce. There is not a railroad in all Albania. Wagon roads are found only in a few of the more level sections of the country. The transportation system consists chiefly of pack horse caravans that wind over mountain trails which are always difficult and often dangerous. This lack of facilities for intercommunication has also added to the tribal feuds and prevented any national unity among the people. Thus has Albania been kept from any participation in the world's progress.

Although they are subjects of the Turkish sultan the Albanians are nevertheless a distinct people and boast a racial ancestry more ancient than that of Greece. The Eagle-People have constituted a puzzling problem for the ethnologists. Their racial record is in considerable measure both uncertain and obscure. There is no foundation however for a popular notion that the Albanian is a composite of modern bloods. The formation of the skull and other distinct racial characteristics indicate an approximately pure ancestry and certainly one of great antiquity. The con-

census of scholarly opinion is that the Albanians were derived from the ancient Pelasgan race, the oldest race of Europe. More particularly, the Albanians are considered to be the direct descendants of the ancient Illyrians with an admixture of Macedonians on the east and Epirotes on the south. Thus the Albanians can justly claim to be one of the oldest and purest races in Europe; and this is further attested by the fact that they are a most virile people.

The Albanian language gives additional support to this theory of Albanian ancestry. The language is not at all an Hellenic dialect as is popularly supposed. The Albanian forms one of the eight chief divisions of the Aryan or Indo-Germanic group of languages, and descends directly from the ancient Illyrian tongue. This is indicated by the present day fact that the Gheg dialect in northern Albania, which is the geographical duplicate of the southern part of ancient Illyricum, is purer and has less structural change than the Tosk dialect in the south which shows the influence of the Greek. The Gheg dialect is also more primitive in form. Both Gheg and Tosk dialects are loaded with loan-words, those of the former being borrowed largely from the Turkish while the latter have been derived from the Greek. In the days of the empire when Albania was a Roman province the Albanian language was modified not only by the addition of Latin words but also by changes in forms and inflexions. But the entire lack of a written language makes it difficult to trace the development of the modern Albanian tongue. Of literature Albania has not a shred.

The Albanians have an heroic but unheralded history. They have given to the world Alexander the Great, and Crispi the Prime Minister of Italy. Both these men are of direct Albanian origin. The great national hero, however, is Skanderbeg, who in the fifteenth century destroyed the Turkish armies which invaded Albania. During his lifetime Albania was independent. But after his death Turkey reëstablished her oppressive rulership; and with the exception of a partial freedom in southern Albania secured in the eighteenth century by Ali Pasha, the Albanians have continued to exist under the hard hand of the Sultan.

Albania is a country of fascinating interest and the few adventurous travellers who have penetrated the mountain fastnesses have been richly repaid for the discomforts and dangers of the journey. The mountain scenery has a wild grandure not easily put into words. Here are pioneer studies for the geologist, the historian and the archeologist—enough to last a life-time. The country is rich in unexplored interest of every kind. The old Via Egnatia is an illustration. In the days of the empire Albania was a Roman province, forming the connecting country between Italy and the far east. The Via Appia led from Rome down to ancient Brindisium. Directly across the Adriatic on the Albanian coast was Dyrrachium, now known as Durazzo. In the time of the Caesars it was an important seaport with a hundred thousand people. Today it has less than four thousand. It was at Dyrrachium that the famous Via Egnatia began, as a continuation of the Via Appia, leading eastward through the winding mountain passes to Thrace, and thence to ancient Byzantium (now Constantinople), the gateway to Asia. The roadway was built as a great compact ribbon perhaps eight feet in width, but varying, composed of foot-square stone blocks. Culverts spanning small streams were of heaviest masonry. The bridges are a marvel of beauty and strength. One particularly fine specimen crosses the River Skumbi about four hours' journey east of Elbassan. With the exception of some slight repairs at the southern entrance the bridge is as perfect as when the Roman engineers builded it twenty centuries ago. No modern stone bridge can compare with it in the graceful curves of its arching roadway or with the effect of lightness combined with great strength. Over this bridge and along this Via Egnatia went Cicero on his way to banishment at Thessalonika. Here journeyed Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, going to his martyrdom at Rome. Over this great road, the most important highway of antiquity, passed the legions of the West and the commerce of the East.

The people of Albania are a wonderful people, virile, clean of blood above the usual, and possessed of rugged, heroic virtues worthy of a better civilization. They are

high-spirited and call themselves the Eagle-People. They have a fine sense of honor. An Albanian's word is to him a sacred obligation and he will keep it in the face of every difficulty. The Albanian kavas or guard of an American family in Turkey was once a brigand. But this is nothing against his integrity and loyalty in his present position. He has given his pledge to protect the lives and property of his employers and he can be entirely depended upon to do it to the extent of his life. It is an obligation of honor for an Albanian to keep his word. Albanians are commonly employed as guards and messengers in banks, and in similar positions of trust and responsibility. Abdul Hamid's body-guard was composed entirely of stalwart, fearless Albanians. The sultan was safe in their keeping not because of their affection or respect for him, but because they had given the "word of honor" to protect him.

The Albanian is also possessed with a fierce but worthy chivalry. He has a high regard for women and they are everywhere treated with consideration and courtesy, of course within the limitations of oriental standards. The women of Albania work in the fields and carry rather more than their fair share of the burdens of the family. But the woman is regarded as the queen in her home. She has full authority and even arranges the marriages of her sons and daughters, who render her a fine-spirited obedience and reverence quite unknown in the Western world.

The population of Albania is not definitely known for no census has ever been taken. It is estimated that there are about two and a half millions of Albanians in Albania, with several hundred thousand in southern Greece, and smaller colonies in Roumania, Egypt and America. The number of Albanians in the United States is variously estimated from twenty thousand upward.

There are two well-defined classes of Albanians: the Ghegs in the north and the Tosks in the south. Similarly northern Albania is known as Ghegaria and southern Albania as Toskeria. In temperament, language, costume and custom there is a wide variation in the peoples of the north and south. The Tosk is milder in spirit and is less inclined

to reckless murder. His speech is influenced by the softer Greek and his costume includes the Grecian fustanelle or plaited linen skirt. The clan spirit is not so strong as in the north, and the southern Albanian affects more of the European manners. He takes some pride in saying "a la Franc," a general term for anything modern and progressive from clothes to character, and describes the belatedness of himself or his people by the antithetical phrase, "a la Turk." The Tosks are quite ready for the advantages of civilization and respond quickly to any opportunity for personal or social uplift. Kortscha the geographical capital of Toskeria enjoys the double distinction of being the most progressive city in Albania and the cleanest city in European Turkey. The better class of people wear European clothes, and a steam flour mill adds a touch of commercial civilization. But the grain is still trodden out by horses on circular threshing floors.

The Ghegs in the north are wild and rugged in temperament, possessed of a fierce spirit of independence both personal and tribal. Nowhere is life *cuite* so cheap, and it is cheap enough all over Albania. Shooting is a fine art and the soul of the Albanian commonly escapes through a bullet hole. In one particular the Albanian is entirely modern to the hour: he carries, and uses, either a Mauser or a Martini, and that too of the latest and most improved model. This holds true of all Albanians, but intensively so among the fierce and fearless men of the north. The costume of the Gheg has no patience for the Grecian skirt. His close-fitting trousers of heavy white woolen fabric, curiously adorned by broad black braidings, not unfittingly suggest the markings of a tiger. The customs are wildly primitive. The clan or tribal system prevails, and endless petty warfare is the accompaniment. The Albanian language finds its purest expression in the Gheg dialect which retains more clearly than the Tosk the forms and flexions of the ancestral Illyrian. So different are the dialects of Gheg and Tosk that the people of north and south have some difficulty in conversation. No definite boundary separates the two classes of Eagle-People; but the River Skumbi, flowing west-

ward past Elbasan suggests a natural division of the country.

Elbasan is geographically, but unofficially, the capital city of Albania. It is centrally located and combines the elements of both Tosk and Gheg civilization—or the lack of it. It is a city of fascinating interest, utterly oriental, and practically untouched by the rest of the world. It is accessible only by pack-horse and mountain trail. The street life is picturesque above description. Thousands of vagrant ducks constitute, like the former dogs of Constantinople, the only sanitary commission of the city. Silk of rare texture and striking in design and color is woven on crude hand looms in the homes. Tobacco of remarkable sweetness is openly prepared and sold in defiance of the Turkish governmental monopoly. The citizens of Elbasan have a progressive spirit and if opportunity offered would eagerly adopt the institutions and methods which secure the welfare of other cities. But, as is the case with most of the Albanian cities, the combination of inaccessibility and stubborn Turkish opposition to progress keeps Elbasan in medieval belatedness.

For Turkey realizes that her chief hope of retaining Albanian territory lies in keeping the Albanians in their past and present condition of ignorance and superstition. Consequently no schools have been provided, no modern inventions have been permitted, no opportunity for the smallest progress or uplift has been afforded. The poverty of the Albanians, both materially and spiritually, is pathetic; the more so because it is so opposed to the Albanian spirit. The Albanian people are quick to appreciate and respond to any challenge of a better way. In a fine sense they are an ambitious people. And they need only a fair opportunity to establish themselves in a better civilization.

That the Albanians are not free from grievous evils must be conceded. They have their besetting sins like other peoples. But their vices are, to a greater extent than in more progressive nations, the perversion of virtues. An instance of this is found in the blood-feuds which constitute the greatest curse of the country. This custom of private vengeance obtains to some degree in all sections of Albania.

But in some localities, especially in the north country, the blood-feuds make great and endless slaughter. Thousands of men are thus murdered every year and the Turkish government seems powerless to prevent it. Now this vicious system originated in the Albanian sense of honor and love of justice. But when the Turkish government centuries ago failed to even attempt to administer justice and punish criminals, the Eagle-People were gradually forced to protect themselves and to enforce some code of personal vengeance. This in time developed or rather degenerated into a system of retributive murder, supported by a false and artificial code of personal and family honor. But with all its inhumanity and falsity the blood-feud crudely involves two primitive but high ideals for the Albanian: his regard for justice and his sense of honor. The Albanian's vices result chiefly from the misdirection or perversion of his virtues.

The religion of the Albanian has little dynamic relation to his character or his conduct. He carries his religion rather lightly and it is little more than the outer garment of custom. This does not mean that the Albanian is incapable of religion in its deep and vital interests. It means only that he has been unfortunate in his religious environment. Of religion as an experience of intrinsic worthfulness, with a moral content and a divine schedule the Albanian knows practically nothing. The only religion he is acquainted with "has a string to it" and a price withal. From one-half to two-thirds of the Albanians are Mohammedans. This does not imply that the Moslem faith has taken root in the Albanian character. The Albanian has simply adopted the official religion of Turkey as an instrument of political privilege. The right to bear arms and other temporal advantages accrue to holders of the Moslem faith, and the Albanian is a good deal of a pragmatist. As a matter of form and as an easy means to highly desirable ends the Albanian is a Moslem. In fact he is religiously indifferent.

Of the remainder of the Albanian population more than one half are of the Greek Orthodox faith and less than one-half are Roman Catholics. The Greek Church naturally predominates in the south where Greek influences, religious

and otherwise, filter across the boundaries. The ministries of the Greek Church are heavily burdened with superstitious rites, and the clergy are all too frequently both ignorant and bigoted. The Roman Catholics in the north fare little better. All three religious ministries, Mohammedanism, the Greek Church and the Roman Catholic faith have been thrust upon the Albanian from without and none of them have entered his life as a dynamic of righteousness. Some of the more thoughtful Albanians are beginning to see this fact and to realize the necessity of some religious ministry which will invest life with high moral and spiritual ideals and become a force in the uplift of the people. Among all Albanians who have learned at all of the better civilizations there can be seen an indefinable yearning for the finer things of the spirit.

This is true not in any narrow pietistic sense, but in the inclusive meaning of aspirations which are divinely high and wide. The general character of this spirit of uplift among the Albanians is shown in the instant use of all means of culture and education made available by the Turkish revolution and reestablishment of the Constitution. As soon as "liberty, equality, fraternity and justice" were proclaimed the Albanians eagerly undertook to translate these ideals into fact and experience. Everywhere Albanian clubs were organized; not for purposes bibulous or gastro-nomic, nor for political intrigue, but for the concrete work of lifting Albanian life to a higher level. The club became a clearing house of means and methods for social welfare. Many clubs organized and maintained entirely at the club's expense, schools for boys and young men. Other clubs assisted in the establishment of newspapers. In this fraternal work all minor differences of religious faith or family feud were overlooked; and Albania from north to south began to unfold in a new life. The Albanians themselves could hardly believe that at last the door of opportunity had opened to them. At last they were to be allowed to use their own language, and to satisfy at least in some degree the craving of the people for the truth that makes men free.

The first step was to issue a call for an Albanian Congress to be held in Elbasan. In the latter part of August, 1909, delegates from every part of Albania answered the call, coming long and difficult journeys over dangerous mountain trails. As soon as the Congress assembled it was heartily agreed to subordinate all other questions to the supreme problem of education. With remarkable wisdom and insight it was unanimously agreed that a Normal School was the immediate and basal necessity; for with the previous lack of schools there were few Albanians fitted to teach. A company of experienced educators could not have grasped the situation more intelligently or disposed of it more quickly. For then and there those Albanians out of of their hardship and oppression subscribed the equivalent of fifteen hundred dollars to get the project under way; and two months later the necessary balance of the money was subscribed and the Normal School was opened in the Club Building in Elbasan. At last the door of opportunity was open. It seemed too good to be true.

It was. Within a year the Normal School was closed, all the boys' schools were abolished, every newspaper was suppressed, the Albanian clubs were disrupted and the old régime of heartless Turkish oppression had returned in full force with all its high-handed iniquity. It is a bitter story, a story of shameless injustice on the part of the Young Turks who seem to have inherited, after all, the irreproachable inhumanity of their fathers. The injustice of the present persecution of the Albanians is peculiarly atrocious from the fact that in both revolutions, that of 1908 and 1909, the Albanians had a leading part. To the Albanian officers and soldiers more than to those of any other people is due the overthrow of the old Turkish régime. The insurrection originated in Albania, and the first volunteers to service were Niazi Bey and his men, Albanians of Resna. The backbone of the revolution was Albanian leadership and valor. And yet when the Young Turks are established in the new régime of "liberty, equality, fraternity and justice," they shamelessly deny the benefits of the Con-

stitution to the very people who made it effective or possible.

First an effort was made to thwart the educational plans of the Albanians by opposing the use of the Albanian language in the schools. Failing in this the order was issued that only Arabic should be used for the written or printed Albanian language. As there is no relation whatever between the Arabic and the Albanian tongues such a requirement was as impossible as unreasonable. The basis of the demand was loyalty to the Mohammedan faith, the official religion of the Empire. Most of the Moslem Albanians, however, wore their Mohammedanism too lightly to be coerced by such artificial authority. Moreover, the insincerity of the issue was already apparent in the long-standing toleration of the Greek language as used in the Greek Orthodox Church. The Greek Church has had and yet retains an informal and semi-official standing in the Turkish administration of Albania.

The language controversy while creating some local disturbances did not lead to any high-handed persecution. Later, a controversy over the administration of taxes in northern Albania became an occasion for a military campaign. This was in direct violation of an agreement of long standing between the Albanians and the Turks. A former revolution resulted in the agreement of the sultan to the proposition that taxes raised in Albania should be expended in Albania for the benefit of Albanians. It is said that it was the failure or refusal of the Young Turk régime to respect this clear contract that led to the conflict in northern Albania. The result is as yet indeterminate. But a by-product of this contest opened the way for radical action on the part of the Turks. Reports, apparently well authenticated, came from the Ghegs that soldiers of the sultan had, under orders, committed unspeakable atrocities upon helpless women and old men. An Albanian paper in Elbasan printed a report of such deeds, but without hostile or even adverse criticism. Forthwith was begun a wholesale persecution under the guise of military law. The printer of the paper was court-martialed and sentenced to both fine and

imprisonment. The editor was exiled for life. The Normal and all other schools were closed. The missionaries of the American Board in Elbasan were ordered to Monastir. Several prominent Albanian leaders of high character and pure purpose escaped the country with their lives. Many beys who were associated in the uplifting movement were driven out, their property confiscated and their houses burned. The girls' school in Kortcha so bravely conducted for twenty years by the sacrificial work of Miss Kyrias was ordered closed, and the two American missionaries were threatened with harm or expulsion. In Elbasan hundreds of Albanians have been brutally beaten and the city is under the usual atrocious military administration of the Turks. An imperial irade has recently been issued ordering that forty Albanian leaders in various parts of the country shall be hanged in public in the near future. "Liberty, equality, fraternity and justice?" It was too good to be true—in Albania.

And what of the future? No one can say. It is not easy to prophesy in Turkey. It is a country of surprises. But the progress of mankind must eventually bring a better day for Albania. Just how or when it will come does not yet appear. There are several neighboring nations that would welcome an excuse or an opportunity to give the Eagle-People a civilization like their own. That the Albanian people may gain their own independence appears improbable but not impossible. The Albanians would doubtless be satisfied to continue under Turkish authority if only they could have their fair share of "liberty, equality, fraternity and justice." It seems unbelievable that the Turkish government should continue the short-sighted and self-defeating policy of persecution and oppression. The Albanians constitute the most virile race in the Turkish Empire. More than any other class of Turkish subjects they have served the sultan with honor and valor in peace and war. If the Young Turk government would only show some loyalty to the welfare of Albania the Eagle-People would develop into a source of tremendous strength for the integrity of the Empire. The Albanian is quick to respond to the challenge

of good will. He is as faithful in his friendships as he is fierce in his enmities. He makes a fine citizen but a poor subject. His high sense of honor and his temperamental capacity for unswerving and intense loyalty fit him for the highest type of Turkish citizenship. It is a pity that the Turkish government cannot appreciate the latent strength which Albania could bring to the character of the Turkish Empire.

A century ago Lord Byron discovered and described the heroic qualities of the Albanian character. And his estimate yet holds true.

“Fierce are Albania’s children, yet they lack
Not virtues, were those virtues more mature.
Where is the foe that ever saw their back?
Who can so well the toil of war endure?
Their native fastnesses not more secure
Than they in doubtful time of troublous need:
Their wrath how deadly! but their friendship sure
When Gratitude or Valor bids them bleed,
Unshaken rushing on where’er their chief may lead.”